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ABSTRACT

This paper presents an overview of a systematic primary prevention program for promoting social competency in junior high school students, including a summary of goals, method, techniques, leadership requirements, and evaluation research. The Social Skills Training Program is described as a curriculum-based, small group program which teaches behaviorally defined interpersonal skills in a developmental progression reflective of the natural priority of interpersonal skill emergence in normal adolescent social development. A variety of training modalities, including discussion, art, role playing, and the systematic teaching and practicing of communication skills are explained in detail. The evaluation results of the program are also included, which indicate no differences in self-concept between trainees and control group members. (Author/JAC)

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A PROGRAM FOR TEACHING PRIMARY PREVENTIVE SOCIAL SKILLS

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A PROGRAM FOR TEACHING PRIMARY PREVENTICE SOCIAL SKILLS

RATIONALE

Recent trends in the health sciences have pointed to an increasing concern for developing programs to promote health and prevent illness. At the same time, educators have begun to realize the necessity of planning for the social and emotional needs of children as well as their intellectual and physical needs. These developments have converged into a consistent interest in instituting effective preventive mental health programs in school systems.

While the need for psychological education programs is evident, a problem inherent in many prevention programs is that, if they are successful, nothing happens. Since most people do not become enthusiastic over programs based on negative reinforcement, program developers must provide participants with rewards that are positive, tangible, self-enhancing and measurable (for the sake of students and for program evaluation).

The Social Skills Training Program (SSTP) (Kapp & Simon, 1977), which is discussed in this paper, strives to meet this challenge. This curriculum aims for prevention of mental illness through the systematic teaching of positive behaviors that foster emotional and interpersonal competence. Self-awareness and social communication skills are operationalized into definable components and taught within a systematic training model. This

approach achieves the goal of making something happen while at the same time being rewarding to the students because they are learning skills which they can use and enjoy and which facilitate their ability to handle normal life problems.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

Goals

Social Skills Training (SSTP) is a curriculum based program aimed at the promotion of mental health for children making the transition from pre-adolescence to adolescence. Entering adolescence, junior high school students experience significant physical and emotional changes. Exploring varied facets of personal identity, they both engage in increased self-introspection and devote increased time and energy to the development of peer relationships. In response to these developmental trends, the training program focuses on the enhancement of self-understanding and the systematic teaching of interpersonal skills essential for healthy relationships with peers and adults.

Specific program goals focus on the following skills: (1) self-awareness, (2) the ability to be self-reflective, (3) the ability to identify and communicate feelings and needs, (4) the ability to direct his/her own behavior through a better understanding of personal feelings and experiences, (5) the

ability to listen empathicly, and (6) the ability to form and sustain satisfying relationships with peers and adults. Competency in these areas is essential for effective living through adolescence and in adulthood.

Method

SSTP is designed to be integrated into the regular junior high school curriculum. Skills are taught within an ongoing group composed of five or six students of the same sex and a trained leader. Skills are behaviorally defined and taught in a developmental progression which reflects the natural priority of interpersonal skill emergence in normal adolescent social development. Individual sessions systematically focus upon various components of these interpersonal behaviors.

The following skills form the core of the curriculum and are taught in this sequence.

(1) Self-awareness. This skill requires a knowledge of personal feelings, experiences, behavior, and their interrelationships, and involves the development of multiple, specific labels for self-description.

(2) Self-disclosure. Adequate self-awareness enables the student to disclose feelings and experiences in a manner that builds healthy relationships. Two skills are necessary for effective, purposeful self-disclosre. The first, "direct

communication", entails ownership of feelings and experiences, expressing them in direct "person to person" (I-You) messages. The second skill, "concreteness", refers to making spoken communication specific, to the point, and easily understood (Egan, 1975).

(3) Empathy. Empathy is defined as an interpersonal skill which requires the student to communicate to another that the student understands both the other's feelings and the experiences which cause them (Egan, 1975).

(4) Relationship Building with Peers. Self-awareness and the basic skills of effective speaking and listening are further refined and specifically applied to the process of forming and sustaining healthy friendships. Five aspects of this process are highlighted. The initial focus is enhancement of "self-awareness of interpersonal style". Here students explore their common behavioral patterns and their accompanying feeling states while examining the effects they have on others. The second focus is on the skills of "social initiation", how to reduce the anxiety of being a stranger or newcomer in a group and build confidence in beginnning a new friendship. The third step centers on the skills of "immediacy and interpersonal problem solving". The fourth stage teaches "assertion", straightforward expression of personal feelings and needs while

continuing to respect those of others. This section of the curriculum concludes with a special examination of the recognition and direct and open expression of feelings of anger and affection. Students learn how to communicate these often challenging feelings in a manner that fosters positive growth in peer relationships.

(5) Relationship Building with Adults. The skills involved in relating to adults are similar to those involved in relating to peers. This unit focuses students on the application of the social skills they have learned to relationships with adults. Special time is spent on "communicating feelings and needs to adults" and on "constructively handling problems with authority figures".

(6) Dealing with Loss and Saying Good-bye in Relationships. The program closes with an exploration of the process of coping with the loss of a relationship. Students are taught an approach for saying direct, complete good-byes which makes possible adequate closure in a terminating relationship.

Techniques

The training techniques utilized by the SSTP are multifaceted and tailored to meet the needs of each individual group. A variety of training modalities, including discussion, art, role playing, and systematic teaching and practicing of communication skills, are utilized by group leaders. A typical session would involve brief cognitive input regarding a

particular aspect of a social skill, modeling of an instructional activity, group participation, and discussion. Activities may be verbal, such as describing the last time someone was excited, or non-verbal followed by discussion, such as drawing a life history or a movement exercise to enhance bodily awareness. Sessions focused on relationship building with peers and adults frequently involve skill practice through role playing.

Group activities focus on skill development at each point in the program; however, content for the group discussions generates from the students' own experiences. This personalizes the training experience, allows students to share experiences and concerns within a supportive setting, and fosters the discussion of relevant adolescent developmental issues.

An outline of some of the steps in learning the skill of self-awareness serves as an example of program techniques. The first step calls for learning to identify and label feeling states. Students work toward building a full descriptive vocabulary of human emotion. A discussion of the relationship between visceral experience and feeling states is encouraged. Pantomime and body movement exercises to develop sensory and visceral awareness may be employed. The goal is to enhance self-awareness by teaching students to recognize personal bodily cues associated with various feelings and to develop the

language to communicate emotion.

The second step in teaching self-awareness focuses on the recognition of the relationship between feelings and behavior. Through discussion, examples, and art work, group members are first taught the distinction between thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. This is followed by an exploration of each person's integration of these three facets. Students draw a life history and examine the affective and behavioral consequences of their significant life experiences. Then through discussion, the group strives to link personal experiences to specific feelings. Patterns of behavior that respond to or generate consistent feelings are also explored. Throughout this stage, activities aim to teach students to develop an awareness of the integrated relationship between feelings, external and visceral experience, and behavior.

The third stage of self-awareness training focuses on the recognition of the effects individual behavior has upon the feelings and behavior of others. To meet this objective students investigate repetitive patterns within peer and adult relationships. Recurrent sequences of interactions are role played to foster self-awareness and provide an opportunity for experimenting with new approaches to interpersonal problem solving. The group leader also guides members in discussing the process and patterns of interactions occurring within the group.

The three steps just outlined highlight the SSTP's approach to teaching self-awareness. As illustrated, a variety of techniques are employed within a developmental sequence ordered to foster increasing depth and integration of the complex aspects of personal awareness.

Leaders

The sophistication of the program requires skillful, trained leaders. It is designed to be implemented by school guidance counselors, psychologists, social workers, or trained, supervised paraprofessionals. In addition to demonstrating strong interpersonal competency, good social skills leaders must be able to establish rapport with adolescents and be knowledgable and sensitive to the developmental issues and natural concerns of this age period.

The leader manual provides trainers with detailed background and activities necessary for successful program implementation. However, leaders must adapt materials to the specific developmental level of their group, and progress through the skills at a rate most suitable to meet individual needs.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

A systematic research protocol has been employed to evaluate the effects of SSTP on levels of empathy, self-awareness, and self-concept. Empathy was defined as the communication of

an understanding of the feelings of another person and the experiences that cause them and was measured by the Active Listening Scale (Kapp-Simon, Note 1). Self-awareness was defined as the ability to identify and discriminate feelings and link them to external and visceral experience, and behavior. It was measured by the Self-Awareness Interview (Simon, Note 2). Sefl-concept was measured by the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale (Piers, 1969).

Using random assignment, 143 students from 3 schools were divided into training and control groups. After 24 weekly sessions, trainees demonstrated significantly higher levels of empathy (Kapp-Simon, Note 3) and self-awareness (Simon, Note 4) than controls. No difference was found in self-concept.

SOCIAL SKILLS TRAINING AS A PROGRAM OF PRIMARY PREVENTION

The SSTP is a psychological education program which has as one aim the primary prevention of mental illness. Its format is designed to be part of the regular curriculum for all junior high school students. Its specfic objectives enable teachers of other courses to integrate program goals into the remainder of the curriculum.

The program maintains an educational/growth focus rather than a potentially stigmatizing remedial/deficit focus. In this way it normalizes the experience of difficult and complex adolescent issues while providing students who do possess special

needs with appropriate peer models and skilled adult guidance.

SUMMARY

This paper has presented an overview of the Social Skills Training Program. This primary prevention program is designed to systematically teach self-awareness and interpersonal communication skills to young adolescents. Within a small group framework, it uses multifaceted techniques to foster the development of social competencies necessary for healthy personal development and for the formation of positive social relationships. Research findings have supported the program's effectiveness in teaching the skills of self-awareness and empathy.

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